



## Let Some Government Programs Ride Into Sunset

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

Congress recently passed a 5-year, \$15 trillion federal budget just as many Americans were looking up from calculating their federal income tax bills.

Taxpayers probably didn't like what they saw, and I don't blame them. One trillion is one thousand billion. By any standard, \$15 trillion is an unimaginable amount of money.

What troubles me is that in this budget Congress is not proposing to eliminate a single program or government agency. Though the administration budget process includes an annual review of ongoing programs, Congress isn't doing its part.

Many accounts are funded year after year because there are small—but vocal—interest groups backing them—and no effective Congressional oversight to determine when ideas have run their course.

In an effort to correct these problems, I'm introducing legislation that would create a federal "sunset" commission to identify federal agencies and programs that should be reviewed—and perhaps trimmed or even eliminated.

Many of our best ideas for the federal government "bubble up" from individual states. That's the case here. In Texas, the sunset process has led to elimination of dozens of agencies, and has saved Texas taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars.

Most federal programs are authorized by Congress only for a certain number of years. My bill would establish a commission to scrutinize carefully all unauthorized (technically expired) programs that the federal government continues to fund.

There will be plenty of candidates. A recent 83-page report from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office found that Congress spent just under \$160 billion in 2006 on programs and activities—even though their authorization had expired.

The list included hundreds of accounts, big and small, ranging from the Coast Guard (\$8 billion) to the Administration on Aging (\$1.5 billion) to Section 8 tenant-based housing (\$15.6 billion) to foreign relations programs (\$9.5 billion).

Many of these programs—perhaps most—deserve reauthorization. But Congress should aggressively determine whether they're working as intended.

The bipartisan sunset commission I am proposing would ask a question similar to one the Texas Sunset Advisory Commission asks: "Is an agency or program still needed?"

It would then evaluate each unauthorized agency or program and recommend to

Congress whether it should be abolished, streamlined, consolidated or reauthorized with recommendations for improvements. It would also require Congressional action on each report.

About half of our states now have a similar process. It's time the federal government provided equivalent oversight of our massive and growing federal bureaucracy.

I'm also co-sponsoring the Fair Tax Act again, which would eliminate income, capital gains, payroll, estate, gift, corporate and self-employment taxes, and would replace them with a national retail sales tax. The move would have the net effect of "sunsetting" a good part of the Internal Revenue Service as well.

The Fair Tax Act would apply only to the sale of new goods and services made to consumers. To eliminate hardship, it would provide every household with a monthly rebate check to offset the tax imposed on essential goods and services.

We now spend an estimated \$300 billion filling out forms in our 67,204-page tax code. The simplifications in the Fair Tax Act would eliminate much of that wasted time and reduce a significant drag on our national economy.

Unfortunately, inertia often becomes the rule in Washington, D.C. Inefficient agencies, outdated programs and increasingly complicated taxes can attain the status of immortality. And it's all augmented by a Congressional addiction to increased spending.

From property taxes to income taxes, the overall tax burden continues to rise. This year, Texans will have to work from Jan. 1, 2007, through April 19, 2007, just to pay their combined taxes for the year.

The U.S. remains a great place to innovate and do business. Our country has prospered because the Founding Fathers provided for limited government and maximum personal freedom. But keeping that legacy requires our constant vigilance.

*Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Border Security and Refugees subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee's Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: [www.cornyn.senate.gov/column](http://www.cornyn.senate.gov/column)*